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ABSTRACT

Black Arts Literature--of which the New Black Poetry is the most important manifestation--emerged during the past decade as the appropriate artistic counterthrust to Black Power. Rhetoric and shouting aside, this new thrust was, on a very basic level, simply a call to black folks to redefine Blackness and re-evaluate the Black Experience. For the writer, this reassessment has culminated in a redefinition of the role of the artist and a new perspective on what constitutes Art. Black art must of necessity be functional and relevant to the lives and daily struggles of black people. The creator of Black Arts Literature envisions himself as a Necromancer, a skillful manipulator of the Art of Black Magic, whose job it is to "heal" Black folks through the evocative power of Art, and transform their suffering into constructive political action. In representing the masses, the new Art will be expressive of the uniqueness of Afro-American culture. Hence the quest among Black Arts writers for a style rooted in this cultural sensibility, a style that is emerging as an identifiable Black Aesthetic. Nowhere is this Aesthetic more strikingly revealed in the language of the New Black Poetry, for in creating this new linguistic form, the poets are not only tapping the reservoir of the Black Cultural Universe but doing so in the Black Idiom. Poetic genre strike at the heart of the Black Cultural Sensibility: it is only through oral delivery that the audience can fully appreciate the artistic import and meaning the New Black Poetry. This, then, is the "Power of the Rap." (Author/JM)

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THE POWER OF THE RAP: THE BLACK IDIOM AND THE NEW BLACK POETRY

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Black Arts Literature - of which the New Black Poetry is the most important manifestation--emerged during the past decade as the appropriate artistic counterpart to Black Power. Rhetoric and shouting aside, this new thrust was, on a very basic level, simply a call to Black folks to redefine Blackness and re-evaluate the Black Experience. For the writer, this reassessment has culminated in a redefinition of the role of the artist and a new perspective on what constitutes Art. The creator of Black Arts Literature envisions himself as a Necromancer,[1] a skillful manipulator of the Art of Black Magic, whose job it is to "heal" Black folks through the evocative power of Art, and transform their suffering into constructive political action. Black Art, then, must of necessity, be functional and relevant to the lives and daily struggles of Black people. Yet it must be Art, for the heroic Word-Magician of this new era insists on products that are within the boundaries of formal literary expression.

It should be noted in passing, however, that the contemporary rediscovery and legitimizing of the Black Cultural Heritage is not new in this century. Nor is the political protest stance of the Black writer. Poets like Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, of the Harlem Renaissance Movement of the Twenties, wove both themes of protest and beauty-in-Blackness into their works. But the current Black Art Revival differs from that of the Renaissance in two major respects. First, today's Black artist is not content to be simply a writer, sounding his protest only through his art. He sees himself as a Black man first, and thus as an active participant in the struggle for Black Liberation. Second, rejecting the elitist tendencies of the Renaissance literati, the new Black writer is making Herculean efforts to create a literature that will reach and reflect common

Black folks. The objective is to prevent today's Cultural Consciousness Movement from becoming like that of the Harlem Renaissance, which, according to Langston Hughes, ordinary Harlemites had not even heard of, and if they had, "it hadn't raised their wages any."[2]

The grass roots, lacking the Black Bourgeoisie's white middle class aspirations, have been the bearers and sustainers of Black culture through the centuries. In representing the masses, the new Art will be expressive of the uniqueness of Afro-American culture. Hence the quest among Black Arts writers for a style rooted in this cultural sensibility, a style that is emerging as an identifiable Black Aesthetic. Nowhere is this Aesthetic more strikingly revealed than in the language of the New Black Poetry, for in creating this new linguistic form, the poets are not only tapping the reservoir of the Black Cultural Universe but doing so in the Black Idiom. (Which is what makes much of this poetry difficult reading for whites, and also lends credence to the frequent claim of Black writers that the critics of Black literature should be Black). Within the limitations of written form, today's poets are attempting to capture the flavor of Black American speech - its rhythms and sounds, both its dialect and style. Through their artistic efforts, the poets seem to be saying: if the message is new, the medium must be new also. (Other genres of Black Arts Literature that reflect attempts to synthesize medium and message are, for instance, John Oliver Killens' recent novel, Cotillion,[3] rendered in what Killens labels "Afro-Americanese," and the plays of Ed Bullins, especially the published version of his Duplex.[4] However, poetry continues to be the dominant literary expression of the New Black Writers, for reasons which should become apparent shortly.)

The necessity for this new poetic medium can be best explained within the context of the interrelationship between language and cultural values, especially as it relates to the experience of Afro-Americans. It is a well-founded concept of linguistic anthropology that language is a key to understanding culture. The idiomatic structure and nuances of a language can give us insight into the thought patterns and value structure of another culture. For instance, in linguist Benjamin Whorf's[5] study of the North American Hopi Indians, he demonstrated the correlation between the non-European Hopi language and the concomitant non-European way the Hopi perceives the world and subsequently organizes his culture. On a psychological level, language is intricately bound up with the individual's sense of identity and group consciousness. In the history of man's inhumanity to man, it is clearly understandable why the conqueror forces his victims to learn his language, for there is truth to the axiom: as you speak, so you think. Certainly this principle has been operative in the history of colonized people where the colonizer's language and culture occupy a position superior to that of the colonized, even among the oppressed persons themselves. (The fact that America was once a colony of England goes a long way towards explaining why British English still commands such great prestige in this country--despite the real communication barrier it poses for most Americans.)

Black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon has brilliantly analyzed the colonized African mind, explaining its tragically sick identification with the European culture that oppressed it. The denigration of the African's native language was a basic manifestation of the cultural rejection of Africa by both Europeans and Africans. Speaking of the "Negro and language" [6] in the French West Indies, Fanon characterized the situation thus:

> Every dialect is a way of thinking...And the fact that the newly returned [i.e., from European schools] Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation...

In showing why the "Negro adopts such a position...with respect to European languages," Fanon argued:

> It is because he wants to emphasize the rupture that has now occurred. He is incarnating a new type of man that he imposes on his associates and his family. And so his old mother can no longer understand him when he talks to her about his duds, the family's crummy joint, the dump ...all of it, of course, tricked out with the appropriate accent....

In the American context, the negative attitude toward Black speech--shared by Blacks and whites alike--is but a variation on this same theme. Historically, Black English was the usage pattern of Uncle Remus and Uncle Tom. Contemporaneously, it is the dialect heavily concentrated in America's urban Black ghettoes. Consistently, it has been labelled "poor English." Yet it is a speech pattern which adheres to systematic and regularized grammatical rules (hence "pattern"). More importantly, it continues to be the language of the Group, the Folk, the Black masses to whom the New Poets have committed their talents. Revitalizing the Black Cultural Sensibility dictates that the old pejorative associations be replaced with new positive ones. And so, like the Antilles Negro, who "goes home from France expressing himself in the dialect if he wants to make it plain that nothing has changed",[7] American Black poets are articulating the new consciousness in the lingo of the Folk. For the people's lingo is the poet's lingo too. No longer is the Black writer to be set apart from his ghetto brethren by using the "standard" dialect (known as "talkin proper," or "tryin to talk white" in the Black

community.) The father of the Black Arts Movement, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), attests to the political and cultural oneness triggered by Black English:

> I heard an old Negro street singer last week, Reverend Pearly Brown, singing, 'God don't never change!' This is a precise thing he is singing. He does not mean 'God does not ever change!' He means 'God don't never change!' The difference is in the final human reference...the form of passage through the world. A man who is rich and famous who sings, 'God don't never change,' is confirming his hegemony and good fortune... or merely calling the bank. A blind hopeless black American is saying something very different. Being told to 'speak proper,' meaning that you become fluent with the jargon of power, is also a part of not 'speaking proper.' That is, the culture which desperately understands that it does not 'speak proper,' or is not fluent with the terms of social strength, also understands somewhere that its desire to gain such fluency is done at a terrifying risk. The bourgeois Negro accepts such risk as profit. But does close-ter (in the context of 'jes a close-ter, walk wi-thee') mean the same thing as closer? Close-ter, in the term of its user is, believe me, exact. It means a quality of existence, of actual physical disposition perhaps...in its manifestation as a tone and rhythm by which people live, most often in response to common modes of thought best enforced by some factor of environmental emotion that is exact and specific. Even the picture it summons is different, and certainly the 'Thee' that is used to connect the implied 'Me' with, is different. The God of the damned cannot know the God of the damner, that is, cannot know he is God. As no Blues person can really believe emotionally in Pascal's God, or Wittgenstein's question, 'Can the concept of God exist in a perfectly, logical language?' Answer: 'God don't never change'.[8]

Equally significant in the poets' use of the Black Idiom is their keen awareness of the highly oral nature of Black culture. To get the written word to the Black non-reading, still essentially pre-literate community, the New Black Writer, must, as Don Lee says,

> ...move into the small volume direction...small black works that can be put into the back pockets and purses, volumes that can be conveniently read during the 15 minute coffee break or during the lunch hour...we as black poets and writers are aware of the fact that the masses (and I do not use the word lightly for I am part of the masses) of black people do not read books.[9]

In these "small volumes" the poets have capitalized on the fact that though Black folks don't read, they highly value verbal skills expressed orally. Emphasis is on the ability to rap, and Black culture abounds with verbal rituals and rhetorical devices through which this oral linguistic competence can be expressed.

I am accounting here for a tradition in the Black Experience in which verbal performance becomes both a means of establishing one's reputation and a teaching/socializing force. Black talk is never simple cocktail chit-chat, but a functional dynamic that is simultaneously a mechanism for learning about life and the world and a vehicle for achieving group recognition. Even in what appears to be only casual conversation, whoever speaks is aware that his personality is on exhibit and his status at stake. He must have some knowledge to contribute to the group, and his contribution must be presented in a dazzling, entertaining manner. Black speakers are greatly flamboyant, flashy and exaggerative; Black raps are highly stylized, dramatic and spectacular; speakers and raps are conveyors of information. But Black communicative performance is a two-way street, and so the "audience" becomes both observers and participants in the speech event. With its responses, the listeners can influence the direction of a given rap and at the same time acknowledge (or withhold) their approval, depending on the linguistic skill of the speaker. No preacher can succeed if he's not a good talker. One of the culture heroes of the barbershop, poolhall, or street corner is bound to be the cat who captures everybody's attention with dashing displays of verbal ingenuity. H. Rap Brown was dubbed "Rap" because of his rapping ability, and the continuing success of Chicago's Rev. Jesse Jackson is due in large measure to his ability to "win friends and influence people" with his rap. I mean

like in the church or on a street corner, a Brother is only as bad as his rap bees.

I move now to a consideration of the specific rhetorical devices and linguistic patterns inherent in Black verbal style and the artistry involved in the poets' use of this vehicle for the conveyance of Black Consciousness. Most of my examples will come from Don Lee, the dynamic young writer, who, of all the new Black poets, has most effectively capitalized on the Black Idiom for maximum power and poetic effect.

LINGUISTIC FEATURES IN THE NEW BLACK POETRY

From a strictly linguistic view, Black speech can be characterized in terms of lexicon (vocabulary), syntax (grammar), and phonology (pronunciation). Without delving into the technical controversy over whether these patterns are derived from a West African or an Anglo-Saxon language base,[10] we can apply the term "Black English " on the grounds of statistical validity since the dialect is used by an overwhelmingly greater percentage of Blacks than whites.

The phonological items employed represent the poets' attempts to spell according to Black America's pronunciation. Due to the vagaries of the English spelling system, this is a difficult task and the poets here meet with uneven success. It makes sense for Ernie Mkalimoto to title his poem "Energy for a New Thang,"[11] since Black folk say thang, not thing. Similarly, Don Lee[12] will write mo for more and befo for before because characteristically Blacks delete intervocalic and final r's. Sonia Sanchez[13] renders the loss of participial endings with such forms as hitten, tryin, etc. Even some rather extreme instances come off all right, as in Baraka's attempt to capture

Black America's pronunciation of head with haid.[14] However, such substitutions as u for you, wd. and cd. for would and could, respectively, and yr. for your (as in yr. head - why not yo head?) do not fit any Black scheme of things, and often such alterations do nothing more than make for difficult reading. Nonetheless, we should be apprised of what the poets are trying to do and can certainly applaud their successes in oral performance, for here is where the full range of Black intonation patterns, tonal qualities and other aspects of Black phonology in the poetry spring to life.

Syntax is much more easily rendered orthographically than phonology, and in their employment of grammatical usage, the poets are quite successful in reproducing the dialect. They reveal a fine and accurate artistic ear for the systematic features of Black English syntax and thus skillfully enhance the conversational flavor of the poetry. The most pronounced and distinctive feature of Black English syntax (also the most often cited in the current literature on Black speech), is the use of be as finite verb. Characteristically be (also bees and bes) indicates a repeated state of affairs (i.e., durative aspect). Be is omitted when the statement applies only to the present or when it has the effect of communicating an all-time truth (i.e., no habitual occurrence is conveyed.) For example, the coffee be cold means the coffee is repeatedly, daily, cold; the coffee cold means the coffee is cold now. Some examples from Lee: "u bes hitten the man hard all day long"[15] and "why she be doing the things she don't do."[16] Due to its obvious difference from "white English," then, be is a favorite of the poets, often employed to the point of overuse, and occasionally not in strict conformity with the rules for its application. For example, Sonia Sanchez'"we bes the culture bearers,"[17] for we the culture bearers -- i.e., as a simple statement of an all-time fact.

The lexical items in the New Black Poetry are those generally labelled Afro-American slang--words like cool, hip, up-tight, dig, etc.--ordinary terms with two levels of meaning. This attribution of double meanings to common English words has its origin in the use of a coded language among slaves. Lacking a really different language in which to camouflage their feelings and thoughts from the slave master--now the Man--Black folks simply took the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and made it work for them by imposing upon English words a Black semantic slant. On the Black English level, "stealing away to Jesus" really indicated stealing away from the slave master, and today every Black person knows that your "main nigger" is your best friend. While many terms from the Black Lexicon now enjoy mainstream currency, there are still some expressions which remain insulated in Black America because they are so firmly rooted in the Black Experience and cannot properly be understood outside of the context of that Experience ("doo-rag" and "pimp" discussed below are two such examples). These terms, along with those borrowed by and popularized in white America, have become the conceptual tools of the New Black Poets.

Artistically, the use of Black lexical items gives the poets greater powers of metaphorical condensation within a political-cultural framework that their audience is hip to. Consider, for example, Don Lee's description of Malcolm X as being from a "long line of super-cools, doo-rag lovers, and revolutionary pimps".[18] Super-cools and pimps, living outside the bounds of the white man's law and customs, are culture heroes, dashing, flamboyant men, who don't work and manage to survive by their cunning, wits, and, unfortunately, exploitation of other (usually Black) people. A pimp lives off the earnings of Black prostitutes; a super-cool is a hustler who may have a variety of games, i.e., devious schemes for obtaining what he wants, as confidence ("con")

game. Doo-rag refers to the scarves Black men wear around their heads to hold their pressed (artificially straightened and curled) hair in place. This process is commonly referred to as a "do". (I am talking about a time Pre-Naturals when such coiffured hair was believed to enhance the beauty and sex appeal of Black men.) What Lee is alluding to, of course, is Malcolm X's early life as a criminal, dope pusher, and pimp. However the fact that Lee calls him a "revolutionary" pimp suggests that the leadership and Black political consciousness Malcolm later exhibited lay within him all the time. By extension, Lee is also implying that the same revolutionary potential lies in other Black pimps. With this phrasing then, the poet has used a cultural image and message familiar to his (Black) audience and with a great stroke of brevity has allowed a line to reveal a complete story. (Such, of course, is the way any good poet operates; what is unique here is the effective execution of the operation in a Black way.)

STYLISTIC FEATURES IN THE NEW BLACK POETRY

As the preceding discussion of Afro-American lexicon suggested, it is in style, rather than language per se, that the cultural distinctiveness of the Black Idiom can be located. That is to say that it is not so much the words themselves (which are, after all, English), but the way in which the words are used. The way in which the various patterns of Black communication combine with Black verbal rituals to produce a style that reflects the collective sensibility of Afro-Americans. There is a Black style of speaking/rapping, quite apart from patterns of dialect, and while, as I said earlier, debate ensues over the linguistic origins of Black speech, there is general consensus that the stylistic patterns are the sole property of Black folks.

It is in style, rather than in strict dialect usage, that the power of the rap is made most manifest, and while not all the New Black Poets liberally use the dialect, they do heavily exploit Black verbal style, making this the unifying focal point in the form of the New Black Poetry.

The style of the Black Idiom consists of a Sacred and a Secular component, with both dimensions sharing certain rhetorical commonalities. Elsewhere I have delineated Sacred and Secular styles in greater detail.[19] Suffice it here to say that while the Secular style is the primary domain of the street corner rapper, and the Sacred that of the preacher, no sharp dichotomy exists. The Black preacher's rap and Black church service abound in secularisms and there is very often a sacred quality surrounding the verbal rituals of the Secular style. (The Sacred-Secular continuum in Black culture is exhibited most strikingly in Black music where Gospel and Blues are often indistinguishable--only by digging on the lyrics can you tell). The stylistic features in the New Black Poetry are: the Dozens; the Toast; Call-Response; Signification; Rhythmic Pattern. The first two exist in the Secular Tradition only. The last three appear in both the Sacred and Secular Traditions, but for reasons too complicated to go into here (the decline of religion in contemporary times being a prime one), the poets rely on secular variations of these three devices.

The Dozens

This is a verbal game played by talking disparagingly about someone's mother. The game can extend, by analogy, to include other relatives and even ancestors (although, like Langston Hughes' Jesse B. Semple, most Black folks don't "play the Dozens that far back."[20]) The objective is to better one's opponent with more caustic and usually more humorous insults. Played for fun

or viciousness--and it can be either--the Dozens is a competitive oral test of linguistic ingenuity and verbal fluency in which the winner, determined by the audience's responses, becomes a culture hero.

Lee uses the Dozens to speak satirically of the nonsensical attempts of Blacks to "outBlack" one another:

> into the sixties
> a word was born.....BLACK
> & with black came poets
> & from the poet's ball points came:
> black doubleblack purpleblack blueblack beenblack was
> black daybeforeyesterday blackerthan ultrablack super
> black blackblack yellowblack niggerblack blackwhi-te-man
> blackerthanyoueverbes 1/4 black unblack coldblack clear
> black my momma's blackerthanyourmomma.....[21]

In his short "tribute" to George Wallace, he again uses this ritual to great effect:

> wallace for president
> his momma for vice-president
>
> was scribbled
> on the men's room wall
> on
> over
> the toilet
>
> where
> it's
> supposed to be.[22]

Maya Angelou (of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings fame) plays not the Dozens, but the "Thirteens,"[23] with separate but stylistically parallel versions denouncing the untogetha actions of both Blacks and whites.

THE THIRTEENS (BLACK)

> Your Momma took to shouting
> Your Poppa's gone to war,
> Your sister's in the streets
> Your brother's in the bar,
> The thirteens. Right On.

.....

THE THIRTEENS (WHITE)

> Your Momma kissed the chauffeur,
> Your Poppa balled the cook,
> Your sister did the dirty,
> in the middle of the book,
> The thirteens. Right On.

.....

And you, you make me sorry
You out here by yourself,
I'd call you something dirty,
But there just ain't nothing left,
cept
The thirteens. Right On.

Your money thinks you're something
But if I'd learned to curse,
I'd tell you what your name is
But there just ain't nothing worse
than
The thirteens. Right On.

The Toast

The Toast is a narrative tale, complete with rhymed lines and poetic imagery--gutsy and sexual. The hero is usually a fearless, defiant Black man (what Black folks approvingly call a "bad nigguh"), who overcomes seemingly insurmountable odds. Like Stag-O-Lee who was so bad even white folks feared him and only God was able to kill him--even then it took "3,412 angels 14 days, 11 hours, and 32 minutes to carry the giant death thunderbolt to the Lord."[24] The hero might be symbolized in animal form, like the Signifying Monkey, who, though the underdog, outdoes the big, bad Lion (symbolizing the white man).

Black prison poet Etheridge Knight "toasts" two such bad nigguhs. One is the Black prisoner Hard Rock who "was 'known not to take no shit/From nobody,' and he had the scars to prove it."[25] I mean Hard Rock was so bad he "had once bit/A screw on the thumb and poisoned him with syphilitic spit." Knight's other super-bad underdog is Shine, the protagonist in the old Black folk Toast "Shine and the Sinking of the Titanic." In his poeticized and effectively condensed version, Knight gives formal literary expression to Shine's heroic deeds with such lines as:

And, yeah, brothers,
while white/america sings about the unsink
able molly brown
(who was hustling the titanic
when it went down)
I sing to thee of Shine
the stoker who was hip
enough to flee the fucking ship
and let the white folks drown
with screams on their lips

yeah, I sing of Shine
and how the millionaire banker stood on the deck
and pulled from his pocket a million dollar check
saying Shine Shine save poor me
and I'll give you all the money a black boy needs--
how Shine looked at the money and then at the sea
and said jump in muthafucka and swim like me--[26]

The Toast-Teller narrates in first-person and embellishes the tale according to his own verbal whims; hence no two versions are ever alike, not even when related by the same person. Told in epic fashion, the movement of the Toast proceeds episodically with the overriding theme being the omnipotence of Black folks as symbolized in the lone figure of the Black hero. Full of braggadocio, he is always talkin bout how bad he bees, and his boasting consumes a good portion of the Toast's content. This aspect of the Toast is given a refreshing and innovative poetic twist in Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping":[27]

I was born in the congo
I walked to the fertile crescent and built
the sphinx
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
that only glows every one hundred years falls
into the center giving divine perfect light
I am bad

.....

I sowed diamonds in my back yard
My bowels deliver uranium
the filings from my fingernails are
semi-precious jewels
On a trip north
I caught a cold and blew
My nose giving oil to the arab world
I am so hip even my errors are correct
I sailed west to reach east and had to round off
the earth as I went
The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid
across three continents

I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission

I mean...I...can fly
like a bird in the sky...

Call-Response

Call-Response is a basic ritual in the Black Idiom. It is what one hears in Black churches where the preacher's rap is punctuated by Amen's, Tell it Reb's, Yes, Lord's, etc. It is what Richard Wright describes in the opening scene of "Big Boy Leaves Home"[28] and again in the street corner scene in Black Boy.[29] It is a pattern in which the speaker's solo voice alternates or is intermingled with the audience's response. This can take the form of a back-and-forth banter between the rapper and various members of the audience in which, for instance, they will raise points to see how skillfully he deals with them. Or the audience will spur the speaker on to greater heights of verbal accomplishment by their expressions of approval, such as laughter, or with phrases like "Oh, you mean, nigger," "Get back, baby," or "Get down man," etc. When the New Black Poet performs, responses such as these and frequent Teach Brother's may interrupt him, but he is not unsettled by this; rather he thrives on audience involvement. Of course the poetry on the printed page obviously cannot reflect the Call-Response Pattern, but in a reading, the poet demonstrates his awareness of this ritual and its essential function as a pattern of Black communication. He wants to, indeed needs to know that his audience is moved by his rap and gauges its power by the degree and extent of their vocal responses.

Signification

This is a ritualized insult, a verbal put down, in which the speaker needles (i.e., signifies) his audience or some member of the audience either to initiate verbal "war" or to make a point hit home. Also synonymous with

the Black term, Capping, effective Signification is characterized by exploitation of the unexpected and quick verbal surprises. Like the Dozens, Signification is accepted within a game context with both opponent and audience expecting the speaker to launch this offensive to achieve his desired effect. Many of Don Lee's titles are excellent examples of Signification. E.g.: "Nigerian Unity/or little niggers killing little niggers"; "Reflections on a Lost Love (for my brothers who think they are lovers and my sisters who are the real-lovers)"; "A Poem for Negro intellectuals (if there bes such a thing)"; "A Message All Blackpeople Can Dig (+ a few Negroes too)"[30]; "On Seeing Diana go Madddddd (on the very special occasion of the death of her two dogs--Tiffany & Li'l Bit--when she cried her eyelashes off)."[31]

Lee's "But he was cool or: he even stopped for green lights"[32] is one of the best poetic uses of this device. Here he employs the Signification of the title as a unifying image through the poem. Using the metaphor of cool ironically, Lee proceeds to castigate the typical self-styled Black revolutionary, caught up in rhetoric and appearance; all talk and no action. "Super-cool" thinks he is "ultra-hip"; yet he is doing nothing constructive to aid the cause of Black Liberation beyond "greeting u in Swahili, saying good-by in Yoruba, and wearing a double natural that wd. put the sisters to shame." (I mean, like, can you dig a cat being so cool that he even stops for GREEN lights?) Lee gets excellent poetic and political milage out of the color imagery in the poem, juxtaposing green-cool with red-hot. To be Black is not to be calm, cool, and collected. To be Black is to be angrily aware of, heated, and moved by Black oppression. "To be black is to be very-hot."

Rhythmic Pattern

Here I refer to the Black Idiom's emphasis on rhyme and sound. The speaker's voice tone assumes a sonorous, musical quality. The sound of what

he is saying is often more important than sense, in any sheer semantic way, hence there is a good deal of repetition and rhyming for effect. The idea is to mesmerize his audience with the magical sounds of his message. It is this device that links Black verbal style with Black musical style. In using it, the poets are capturing not only the flavor of the Black Idiom, but approximating the sound and soul of Black music, which is believed to be the most important dynamic of Black Cultural Reality. Lyrics or phrases from Black music are interspersed within the poetry, to be sung when the poem is read aloud, as in Lee's title poem, "Don't Cry, Scream (for John Coltrane/from a black poet/in a basement apt. crying dry tears of 'youain't gone.')"[33] At the end of the following stanza, Lee sings the Ray Charles/Temptations' version of "yesterday" for full effect:

> swung on a faggot who politely
> scratched his ass in my presence.
> he smiled broken teeth stained from
> his over-used tongue. fisted-face.
> teeth dropped in tune with ray
> charles singing "yesterday".

In addition, the marginalia of this poem contains such instructions as: "sing loud & high with feeling" and "sing loud & high with feeling letting yr/voice break."

In a similarly effective fashion, Baraka draws upon James Brown's first hit recording, "Please, Please, Please." The poem is "The Nation Is Like Ourselves."[34] In it, Baraka pleads for the return of middle-class Blacks back to the community fold. Having employed the entreaty "please" in several stanzas ("please mister liberated nigger," "please mr ethnic meditations professor," "doctor nigger, please," etc.), Baraka concludes with:

> yes the sweet lost nigger
> you are our nation sick ass assimilado
> please come back
> like james brown say
> please please please

Black poetic raps, like their secular counterparts in the Black Oral Tradition, achieve a fluidity and flowingness due to this Rhythmic Pattern. The poets' breathless, unpunctuated, rap-rap-rap-rap-rap-rap bombards the audience with words, working a kind of hynoptic Black magic on their souls, and hitting the mind and heart in fresh, unexpected ways like good poetry does. Lee's "Poem to Complement Other Poems,"[35] combining musical effects and repetition, excellently exemplifies the totality of this Rhythmic Pattern. Exhorting Black folks to enter into a new state of consciousness, the Poet details the types of changes required and the necessity for change. Each statement begins and/or ends with the word change. Some examples:

change. from the last drop to the first, maxwellhouse did. change.
change.
Colored is something written on southern outhouses. change.
greyhound did, i mean they got rest rooms on buses. change.
change, stop being an instant yes machine. change.

The poem continues like this for several lines, building to the climax of the last stanza, where the word change is repeated 23 times in near succession. With the final lines of repetition, Lee plays off on the phonological similarity between change and chain and gives us something reminiscient of Aretha Franklin singing about the "chains of love." (It's obvious, of course, what kind of "chains" Lee is singing about.)

realenemy change your enemy change your change
change change your enemy change change
change change your change change change.

By this point, the audience is completely, nearly mystically engrossed in the evocative call of the poem and prepared for its message, contained in the hard-hitting impact of the concluding line "change your mind nigger."

Conclusion

Traditionally, poetry was recited and/or sung such that its creator was a kind of performing bard. Couple this with Black Culture's emphasis on orality, music, and verbal performance. It then becomes clear why the poetic

genre strikes at the heart of the Black Cultural Sensibility, and also why it is only through oral delivery that the audience can fully appreciate the artistic import and meaning of the New Black Poetry. The linguistic/stylistic machinery of this Poetry is firmly located in the Black Oral Tradition, and the Black Poet of today is forging a new art form steeped in the uniqueness of Black Expressive Style. When used skillfully, by, for example, a Don Lee, who is able to synthesize the emotional and the cerebral, this Style becomes an excellent poetic strategy to deliver a political message and to move Black folks to constructive political action. This, then, is the "Power of the Rap."

Footnotes.

1. I borrow this term from Black fictionist, Ishmael Reed, who says:

> Sometimes I feel that the condition of the Afro-American writer in this country is so strange that one has to go to the supernatural for an analogy. Manipulation of the word has always been related in the mind to manipulation of nature. One utters a few words and stones roll aside, the dead are raised and the river beds emptied of their content.
>
> The Afro-American artist is similar to the Necromancer (a word whose etymology is revealing in itself!). He is a conjuror who works JuJu upon his oppressors; a witch doctor who frees his fellow victims from the psychic attack launched by demons of the outer and inner world.

See his Introduction to 19 Necromancers From Now (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Edition, 1970).

2. Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), p. 228.

3. John Oliver Killens, The Cotillion or One Good Bull is Half the Herd, (New York: Trident press, 1971).

4. Ed Bullins, The Duplex: A Black Love Fable in Four Movements, (New York: William Morrow, 1971).

5. Benjamin Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality, ed., John B. Carrol (Cambridge: M.I.T. press, 1966).

6. Frantz Fanon, "The Negro and Language," Black Skin, White Masks, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 17-40.

7. Ibid.

8. Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), "Expressive Language,: Home (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966), pp. 171-72.

9. Don L. Lee, "Directions for Black Writers," The Black Scholar (December, 1969), pp. 53-57.

10. On this controversy, see Raven I. McDavid, "Historical, Regional, and Social Variation, "Journal of English Linguistics, I (March, 1967). (also his earlier "The Relationship of the Speech of American Negroes to the Speech of Whites," American Speech XXVI (Feb., 1951) and J. L. Dillard, Black English (New York: Random House, 1972).

11. Ernie Mkalimoto, "Energy for a New Thang," New Black Poetry, ed. Clarence Major (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 90.

12. See especially the poems in Lee's Black Pride and Think Black (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968).

13. See especially Sanchez' We a Badd DDD people, (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970).

14. From Baraka's "W.W." in New Black Poetry, p. 78.

15. Don L. Lee, "The Revolutionary Screw," Don't Cry, Scream (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), p. 57.

16. Don L. Lee, "Blackman/an unfinished history," We Walk the Way of the New World (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970), p. 22.

17. Sonia Sanchez, "Queens of the Universe," The Black Scholar, (January-February, 1970), pp. 30-34.

18. Don L. Lee, "Malcolm Spoke/who listened," Don't Cry, Scream, p. 33.

19. See my forthcoming "White English in Blackface, or Who Do I Be?"

20. Langston Hughes, "Feet Live their Own Life," The Best of Simple (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 3.

21. Don L. Lee, "Gwendolyn Brooks, "Don't Cry, Scream, pp. 22-3.

22. Lee, "From a Black Perspective,", ibid., p. 34

23. Maya Angelou, "The Thirteens," Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie, (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 46-47.

24. Julius Lester, "Stagolee," Black Folktales, (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 129.

25. Etheridge Knight, "Hard Rock Returns to prison From the Hospital for the Criminal Insane," Poems From Prison, (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968), pp. 11-12.

26. Knight, "I Sing of Shine," The Black Poets (New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 209-10.

27. Nikki Giovanni, "Ego Tripping," Re: Creation, (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970), pp. 37-38.

28. Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," Uncle Tom's Children (New York: Harper and Row, perennial edition, 1936), pp. 17-23.

29. Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, perennial edition, 1937), pp. 88-92.

30. These poems can be found in his Don't Cry, Scream.

31. This poem is in We Walk the Way of the New World.

32. From Don't Cry, Scream, pp. 24-5.

33. Ibid., pp. 27-31.

34. Baraka, "The Nation Is Like Ourselves," It's Nation Time (Chicago: Third World Press, 1970), pp. 7-11.

35. From Don't Cry, Scream, pp. 36-38.